DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 219 957 FL 013 152

TITLE	A Guide for Employers of Refugees.
INSTITUTION	Center for Applied Linguistics, Washington, D.C. Language and Orientation Resource Center.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Refugee Resettlement (DHHS), Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE	82
NOTE	19p.
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Cross Cultural Training; Cultural Awareness; Culture Conflict; *Employees; *Employer Employee Relationship; *Employers; Employment Interviews; Employment Potential; English (Second Language); *Refugees

ABSTRACT

Some of the more frequently asked questions about employing refugees in the United States are answered in this booklet. Information on working papers and hiring procedures is given, as well as suggestions for making the training process easier. The employer/employee relationship is discussed and possible areas of misunderstanding are noted. For more information and assistance, lists of the regional directors of the Office of Refugee Resettlement and of the national voluntary agencies are appended. (EKN)

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A Guide for

Employers of Refugees

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Who are the refugees anyway?

Based on an international definition formulated by the United Nations, the Refugee Act of 1980 describes a refugee as "a person who is outside his/her country of nationality (or habitual residence) who is unable or unwilling to return to that country because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion." Political turmoil in many parts of the globe--Southeast Asia, Africa, South America, Eastern Europe, the Middle East--has provoked the migration of many people across national boundaries fleeing from aggression and persecution. In fleeing, most refugees face hazardous conditions and varying degrees of trauma--death of family members or friends, torture, rape, robbery, starvation or disease. Those who reach the United States and the freedom we have to offer are "survivors" in more than one sense of the word.

A quick glance through the history books shows the many contributions that past refugees and immigrants have made to this country. More recent refugees come with backgrounds and cultures that are far more diverse than our forebears from Europe and other parts of the western world. They have great potential for making substantial contibutions to life in this country, but because of the vast differences between our languages and cultures they may need some assistance in realizing this potential.

For refugees and those working with them, the ultimate goal in resettlement is self-sufficiency. Helping refugees to become contributing members of American society means helping them get and keep jobs and attain the language and cultural skills for living in the United States.

The most direct and immediate assistance that you as an employer can provide a refugee is a job. In return, you will get an employee who has been reported by other employers to be "punctual, productive and promotable." A call to several employers of refugees in your area will substantiate this. Refugees provide a source of blue-collar labor for many parts of the country where the supply of unskilled and semi-skilled workers is severely strained. While language may initially be an obstacle, most refugees are more than willing to attend classes when they are available.

This Guide answers some of the most frequently asked questions about refugee employees. It may not answer all of the questions you may have; you are encouraged to contact any of the resources listed at the end, or the Language and Orientation Resource Center at the toll-free number listed on the cover, for more information.

Do refugees have the right to work?

Anyone admitted into the United States with the legal status of refugee will have one of the following two documents that authorize his or her right to work:

- An I-94 form, issued by the Immigration and Naturalization Service, stamped "employment authorized," or the equivalent.

- A "Permanent Resident Alien" identification card (known as a "green card"). This card may be presented by a refugee who has been in the United States for a year or more and who has applied for and been granted permanent resident alien status. It guarantees the bearer the right to work in this country. In addition, most refugees will have obtained Social Security cards soon after having arrived in the U.S.

What kinds of work can refugees do?

The work backgrounds of refugees vary widely, from unskilled workers to highly skilled professionals. Because of differences in licensing, training and other requirements, it is unusual for professional or skilled refugees to go to work right away in the same types of jobs that they had in their home countries. It is not unusual for such refugees to have to accept unskilled or semi-skilled positions far below their actual abilities, because they do not have the required certification, guild or union membership, documentation of training and experience, or sufficient command of English.

Many refugees come to this country with experience working in jobs that have no equivalence here. While a job itself may not be transferable, many of the attendant skills may be, with a little additional training. For example, someone who made fish nets is unlikely to find such a job in this country. However, the manual dexterity and level of concentration required for weaving fish nets are skills that could very easily suit the person for working on the assembly of minute electronic parts. Each refugee will have his or her own particular work experience and skills. During the interview, with the assistance of a bilingual interpreter, you can find out about the sorts of things that the refugee has done. No work experience is useless if considered in terms of the tasks and skills involved, even if the job itself is not transferable.

Will refugees take part-time, seasonal or temporary work?

Refugees are looking for ways to support and maintain their families and to be self-sufficient, contributing members of society. Although they may look for jobs that offer greater security, benefits or salary, many refugees are grateful simply for the opportunity to work and earn money. Some may in fact look for part-time or seasonal work to enable themselves to attend school or vocational training programs in their spare time.

What do refugees know about working in this country?

The knowledge that the refugees have about American work practices, and the expectations of the employer on the job, varies widely. Some have undergone orientation or vocational training, either in the refugee camps in Southeast Asia or in the U.S. Others may know only those things they have learned by talking with other family members and friends. When in doubt, it is best to tell the refugee through an interpreter all that he or she needs to know about the job, any benefits, rules and regulations, procedures for getting paid, calling in sick, punching in and out, in addition to any job-related training. Many refugees are too embarrased or polite to admit that they don't know something when asked, and may say or nod "yes" even when the real answer is "no."

How do I go about hiring a refugee?

There are a number of ways you can go about reaching the refugee labor pool in your community. You can contact:

- Local sponsors: The local sponsors of refugees may be individuals, families, church or community groups. Contact any of the churches in your community and chances will be that it has sponsored a refugee family or somebody in the church has sponsored one.

- Employment agencies and vocational training schools: These organizations will have lists of refugees in the community. Job counselors and/or vocational teachers could provide you with information about the working experience and skills of the refugees. In addition, there are industry-labor groups such as Private Industry Councils (PIC's) who can provide information.

- Voluntary agencies (also known as Volags; there is a list at the back of this guide): These are the agencies responsible for resettling refugees in the United States. There may be a local affiliate in your area. You can look in your local phone book or contact one of the national offices listed under resources to find out who the local affiliate might be.

Do I have to fill out any special forms or papers when hiring a refugee?

No. Hiring a refugee is no different from hiring any other employee. There are no special forms, papers, reports or anything else out of the ordinary required.

If I hire a refugee, do I have to make any special commitment?

Again, the answer is no. You are not obliged to do anything other than what you would normally do with any new employee. There are, however, a few things that you may wish to consider, both for your benefit and that of the refugee. These are discussed below.

Do refugees speak any English?

The ability of the refugees to speak English ranges widely from fluency to little or no command of the language. Many communities offer classes in English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) that the refugees can attend. You may also wish to consider the benefits of instituting an ESL program at the work site if you employ several refugees, or of developing a cooperative venture with a Volag, MAA, community college, adult education department, or local refugee social service. The advantage to this is that the English program would be designed to meet the specific needs of your business and could be integrated into your existing employment training program.

How will the refugees get along with the other employees?

There is no reason why the refugees should not get along well with other employees. Experience has shown that any difficulties or problems that do arise are generally due to language and cultural misunderstandings. With a little effort and the help of a bilingual interpreter, these can usually be straightened out quite easily. One way to avoid any possible misunderstanding is to provide some orientation to the other employees about the backgrounds and cultures of the refugee employees. Additionally, a company picnic or party is a good occasion for the refugee employees to share some of their culture with the others through food, music and dance. The employees at one small company have even instituted a communal lunch once a a week, where the refugees and Americans each bring a dish to share. Many refugees will also value the opportunity to practice their English with American co-workers.

Can the refugee be trained the same way that I train my other employees?

The answer to this is yes, and no. Basically, the content of the training will probably not have to be altered in any substantial way. It may, however, have to be done in the refugees' native language, depending on their ability in English. This can be done by using a bilingual interpreter. Finally, for refugees who are illiterate in their own language and/or English, all the training may have to be done orally and through hands-on experience, rather than handing the refugee a manual of diagrams and explanations. Volags, MAA's, and some of the sources listed at the end of this guide can provide assistance and suggestions with regard to training. In addition, the informal on-the-job training provided by co-workers is invaluable for the refugees. Seasoned employees may want to volunteer to assist the refugees during the first few weeks on the job. If other refugees are already employed in your business, they can serve as good initial trainers.

- Departments of Adult Education: Many refugees are taking English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) courses, if they are available in the community. ESL teachers and program administrators may have suggestions for refugee employers.

- Mutual Assistance Associations (MAAs): These are self-help groups that refugees in different geographic areas have formed. Some are listed in the phone book. Information about others may be obtained from some of the resources listed in the back of this guide. In your community, one of the best sources of information on MAA's are the local ethnic grocery stores, small businesses and other ethnic-managed shops.

- Ethnic media: Many areas of the country have newspapers published in the refugees' languages. Again, ethnic shops would be possible sources of information regarding these newspapers. Other areas have radio or TV programs aired in different languages.

Advertisements for positions can be placed with these different groups. Some, such as the Volags, MAA's, or local sponsors, may have special job counseling or job placement services for the refugees and will suggest job openings to them for which they seem particularly suited.

Where do I get a bilingual interpreter?

If you have employed refugees or immigrants before, you know how valuable a worker can be who is bilingual and understands the differences between various cultures. This person can serve as a bilingual interpreter during interviews and training, and as a source of help with problems or questions during the work day. If you have no one available as an employee, you can turn to a number of other sources: a local ethnic group such as a Mutual Assistance Association, a voluntary agency; or an English-as-a-Second-Language program which has refugees in its classes. You can also call the Language and Orientation Resource Center, the Regional Offices of the Office of Refugee Resettlement, or your state refugee coordinator's office for help.

How do I set up an ESL or cross-cultural training program for my employees?

There are trained professionals in English-as-a-Second-Language and cross-cultural communication who can help design training programs which are sensitive to employer and employee needs and which will increase employer-employee cooperation and communication. The Language and Orientation Resource Center can help identify appropriate resources for you.

Other than language and cultural differences, are there any other problems I may face with refugee employees?

It is always difficult to predict whether there may or may not be problems with an employee since so much depends on the individual, refugee or not. A combination of common sense and consideration towards the refugee employee will, in the long run, produce both material and personal benefits.

What about my relationship as employer with the refugee?

Here again much will depend upon the individual. There are some cultural differences that you may wish to be aware of. In some of the refugees' cultures, the Indochinese in particular, the employer is looked upon as a patron, protector and guardian. Any sort of minor conflict or confrontation with the employer can result in great embarrassment or even shame. To please you, or to avoid disapproval, the refugee may respond to a straightforward question in the way he or she thinks you would want it answered, rather than in the way you would consider truthful.

Refugees also may have a problem understanding how Americans separate work time from leisure time, and how, for example, during work time you could be someone's boss, yet during leisure time you are only that person's friend and neighbor.

None of these differences should create insurmountable difficulties. You need only spend a little time learning a bit about the refugee's culture to be aware of potential areas of problems through misunderstanding, and have the willingness to spend the small amount of time needed to help the refugee understand the American way of doing business. This is also true for the person who is the refugee's immediate supervisor. The refugee may need help understanding your role as employer versus the role of the immediate supervisor.

Many refugees, however, have already discussed cultural differences in employment in an overseas or U.S. cultural orientation program. These refugees will have a better idea of employer-employee relationships.

What if I have to fire or lay off a refugee employee?

This would be no different than having to fire or lay off any other employee. It is however, helpful to the refugee to understand the reasons involved since some may take this as a personal failure. You may consider taking a little time to explain and suggest to the refugee what to do next.

What about the refugee's attitude toward the job?

Refugees have been widely cited by employers as being diligent and conscientious workers, regardless of the level of the job they hold. Like other Americans, refugees will look for the opportunity to advance on the job and will seek out possibilities for acquiring additional training and skills to do so. Many companies have seen that it is to their own benefit to provide some of this training, as well as language classes, to advance refugees as employees within the company, rather than to lose them to jobs elsewhere which provide greater opportunity and benefits.

What else can I do besides or instead of providing employment?

The business sector can and has provided assistance to the refugee resettlement effort in a variety of ways. Companies have provided emergency workers and supplies for refugee camps, paid for air passage for refugees to come to the United States, encouraged their employees to sponsor refugees, and provided classrooms and instructors for vocational training and English-as-a-Second-Language classes. Some have developed cooperative ventures with Volags and MAA's for providing orientation and training. Others have contributed to the cost of running orientation classes, job counseling and English classes. A few companies have "lent" their executives in an advisory capacity to small businesses started by refugees. There are many other possibilities for you as an employer to offer assistance.

How can I get more information and assistance?

The following pages list some of the organizations that are available to provide more information about the different refugee groups. Additionally, each state has a refugee coordinator whom you could contact about activities in your state. The name and number can be obtained from the state information office or from the Office of Refugee Resettlement/DHHS for your region listed on the following pages.

Office of Refugee Resettlement Regional Directors

Region I (CT, NH, RI, VT, MA, ME)

Jack Anderson
Regional Director, O.R.R.
J.F.K. Federal Building, Rm. 2403
Government Center
Boston, MA 02203

Region II (NY, NJ, PR)

Sandra Garrett
Regional Director, O.R.R.
Room 4149 Federal Building
26 Federal Plaza
New York, NY 10007

Region III (PA, MD, WV, DC, VA, DE)

William J. Neary
Regional Director, O.R.R.
3535 Market St., Rm. 10400
P.O. Box 13716
Philadelphia, PA 19101

Region IV (GA, AL, FL, GA, KY, MS, NC, SC, TN)

Suanne Brooks
Regional Director, O.R.R.
101 Marietta Tower, Suite 1503
Atlanta, GA 30323

Region V (IL, IN, MN, MI, OH, WI)

Dick Schoen
Acting Regional Director, O.R.R.
300 S. Wacker Drive, 35th Floor
Chicago, IL 60606

Region VI (TX, AK, LA, NM, OK)

James A. Turman
Regional Director, O.R.R.
1200 Main Tower, Room 1135
Dallas, TX 75202

Region VII (MO, IA, KS, NE)

Richard Burnett
Regional Director, O.R.R.
601 East 12th Street
Kansas City, MO 64016

Region VIII (CO, MT, ND, SD, UT, WY)

Edwin R. Lapedis
Regional Director, O.R.R.
Room 1185, Federal Building
19th and Stout Streets
Denver, Co 80294

Region IX (CA, AZ, Guam, HI, NV)

Sharon Fuji
Regional Director, O.R.R.
28th Floor, 100 Van Ness
San Francisco, CA 94102

Region X (WA, OR, ID)

John Crossman
Regional Director, O.R.R.
Mail Stop - MS 815
1321 Second Avenue
Seattle, WA 98101

National Voluntary Agencies

American Council for
Nationalities Services
20 West 40th St.
New York NY 10018

American Fund for
Czechoslovak Refugees
Inc. (AFCR)
1790 Broadway Room 513
New York NY 10019

Buddhist Council for Refugee
Rescue and Resettlement
City of Ten Thousand Buddhas
Talmadge CA 95481

Church World Service (CWS)
475 Riverside Drive
Room 666
New York NY 10027

Hebrew Immigrant Aid
Society, Inc. (HIAS)
200 Park Ave. South
New York NY 10003

Idaho State Voluntary Agency
Adult Learning Center
Boise State University
Boise ID 83725

International Rescue
Committee (IRC)
386 Park Ave. South
New York NY 10016

Iowa Refugee Service Center
150 Des Moines St.
Des Moines IA 50316

Lutheran Immigration and
Refugee Service (LIRS)
360 Park Ave. South
New York NY 10010

National Council of YMCAs
291 Broadway
New York NY 10007

Rav Tov, Inc.
Committee to Aid New
Immigrants
125 Heyward St.
Brooklyn NY 11206

Tolstoy Foundation, Inc.
250 West 57th St.
New York NY 10019

US Catholic Conference
(USCC)
Migration and Refugee
Services
1312 Massachusetts Ave. NW
Washington DC 20005

World Relief Refugee Service
National Association of
Evangelicals
P.O. Box WRC
Nyack NY 10960